

## **EARTHWATCH INSTITUTE FIELD REPORT**

**Project Title:** Renaissance Ceramics of Tuscany

**Principal Investigator (s):** Anna Moore Valeri and Marja Mendera

**Position/Affiliations:** Independent scholar (Moore) – University of Siena (Mendera)

**Research Site(s):** Piazza Cavour, Castelfiorentino (Provincia di Firenze, Tuscany), Italy

**Local Management Status of the Research Site(s):** N/A

**Scientific names of primary species being studied:** N/A

### **Key Research Objectives:**

- 1) To determine if a kiln producing common pottery (sgraffito ware) was located on or near this site;
- 2) To determine what kinds of pottery were being produced here;
- 3) To determine when and for how long pottery was being produced here;
- 4) To determine the function of a kiln in the Renaissance era (16<sup>th</sup> century): for example, were they firing only their own pots or were they firing for other potters?
- 5) To determine who was buying and using this kind of pottery.

## **SECTION 1: RESEARCH**

### **Data Collection and Results**

During the month of August 2005 in Piazza Cavour, in the town of Castelfiorentino (located in central Tuscany about the same distance from Florence, Pisa and Siena) excavations were conducted under the direction of Principal Investigators Dr. Anna Moore Valeri, Dr. Marja Mendera, and archaeologist Dr. Marino Marini assisted by 24 volunteers from Earthwatch Institute (photos 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 below). More than 22,700 pottery finds, 2700 kiln spurs and over 1000 other types of finds (coins, metal objects, metal and glass slag, glass fragments, animal bones) were collected, proving the existence of a flourishing pottery kiln here which seems to have produced incised slipware (sgraffito) from the early 16<sup>th</sup> century to the early 17<sup>th</sup> century. In an era in which porcelain and bone china were not yet being made in Western Europe, sgraffito and maiolica (tin-glazed ware) were the two types of ceramics preferred for use as table wares. Like Pisa, Castelfiorentino seems to have specialised in the production of sgraffito wares, while the nearby town of Montelupo was turning out huge quantities of maiolica for local use and for export. Thousands of fragments of Montelupo maiolica have been found in Northern Europe, particularly in Great Britain and in Holland, as well as sgraffito wares which traditionally have always been attributed to Pisa, but which we now believe may in reality have been made in Castelfiorentino and exported from the port of Pisa like the maiolica. This latter possibility represents one of the more interesting and unexpected results achieved and is due to the exceptional quantity of pottery found.

The potters firing their wares at the kiln in Piazza Cavour were specialised in two types of incised slipware: the elegant and costly "fondo ribassato" in which large sections of the slip are scratched away creating the design in relief (photos 6, 8, 11), and the cheaper and often rather messy polychrome "graffita a punta" (photos 7, 9, 10) in which rather hurried sketchy drawings were made by scratching the vessel surface with a fine point and then adding various colours and a transparent glaze before a second firing. They do not seem to have produced the "graffita a stecca", a speciality of Pisa, made by scratching whorls and dashes with a broad pointed instrument similar to a pen used for artistic calligraphy. A large portion of the "fondo ribassato" wares have coats of arms on them, many of which it has been possible to identify (photo 14), like those of the Medici, Pucci, Canacci, Strozzi, Filicaia and Calandri families. The presence of the same coats of arms on many different dishes demonstrates that these families were ordering complete sets. Sgraffito wares were also widely used in monasteries and convents, as is suggested by the numerous religious emblems and symbols like the Holy Monogram (YHS) used by Saint Bernardine of Siena (photo 11) and the knotted rope or *corda francescana*, alluding to St Francis of Assisi (photo 10). Special shapes, like these two little bowls with broad rims, were part of the monastery sets.

Like maiolica, all Tuscan sgraffito ware was fired twice. After being thrown on a wheel, the plate was left to dry for a few hours, decorated with the incised motif and then fired for the first time; the product of this first firing, called a *biscotto*, was opaque and porous. The biscotto was then covered with a transparent glaze and fired a second time. After the second firing the pottery was glossy, impermeable to liquids, and suitable for use as a table ware. About 85% of the pottery found during the excavation in Piazza Cavour were *biscotti* which had been discarded after the first firing.

Other ceramic finds included small quantities of earthenware vessels (mostly pieces of large oil jars and flower pots), minute fragments of lead-glazed cooking wares, and about 100 small fragments of maiolica, all imported from Montelupo except for two pieces of lusterware from Deruta and two fragments of Hispano-moresque maiolica. We also collected a large quantity of refractory bricks, some of which had burnt ceramic fragments stuck to them and were clearly once part of a kiln. These finds are of particular significance because they prove that the kiln structure, if it still exists, is very close to the area where we were excavating.

A peculiarity of Tuscan sgraffito pottery is that it was made only in open shapes (bowls, dishes and plates) to the total exclusion of closed shapes like jugs, pitchers and albarelli (drug jars). We know from paintings that a typical Tuscan table of the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century would be set with either maiolica or sgraffito plates, or a mix of both, often combined with pewter serving dishes, glass goblets and a maiolica wine jug. With one quite extraordinary exception (photo 12) the finds from Piazza Cavour confirm this rule.

The "graffita a punta" style started being made in Tuscany as soon as the sgraffito typology was introduced there, probably around the middle of the 15<sup>th</sup> century and continued to be made until the typology died out completely. During the final stages of production of sgraffito ware in Tuscany, in the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century, Pisa was producing an extremely popular style decorated with a rather sloppy poppy motif incised in the centre and painted with green and dark red or orange. The total absence of this type of decoration in Castelfiorentino suggests that the kiln was no longer operating in this era. The elegant "fondo ribassato" styles, consisting of a foliage motif called the "crab's claw"

on the rim (photo 8, 14) or a “winding ribbon” (photo 6, 11) around a coat of arms or a pinwheel certainly were all made in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Another conspicuous absence was the *marmorizzata* or marbled style, a pottery type that was extremely popular in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and made by almost all the kilns that were producing slipware. The total absence of marbled pottery is another indication that the Piazza Cavour kiln was no longer operating in the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

One of the most interesting finds in Piazza Cavour is the numerous kiln spurs (photo 15), all of which are made from a mould. This fact is quite unusual for a 16<sup>th</sup> century kiln and demonstrates a high degree of organization among the potters. Many of these spurs have identifying marks, symbols or initials on them. In fact, it is now clear that the kiln was firing for many different potters who supplied their own firing equipment along with the vessels to be fired. Each potter collected his own spurs after the firing and reused them until they broke. A mould for making the spurs with the initials represents one of the most significant finds (photo 16) from the excavation.

After investigating the two stratigraphic units (US 1009 and US 1013) which evidently represented the contents of the kiln dump, it was decided to continue the excavation vertically to determine the nature of the underlying layers, rather than extend the excavated area out horizontally, the only purpose of which, at this time at least, would be to collect more pottery. In fact, at a depth of about 1.30 to 1.70 m. below the street level, we identified layers containing glass fragments and slag, crucible fragments and other indicators of glass production, numerous fragments of both green (photo 17) and blue archaic maiolica, many of which were clearly kiln wasters, all indicative of a 14<sup>th</sup> century context, and in the case of the blue archaic maiolica, probably the last quarter of the century or the early 15<sup>th</sup> century. The presence of blue archaic maiolica is particularly interesting as this luxury typology was made in the areas around Florence, Prato, Pistoia, and Siena, but not in Pisa, just to the west of Castelfiorentino, which did, however, have a massive production of the classic green type. Later, at the beginning of the 16<sup>th</sup> century when Castelfiorentino started producing sgraffito ware, Pisa played a major role in influencing both the shapes and decorations they used. After examining the layers containing the *maiolica arcaica*, the excavation was continued vertically in a narrow trench in order to determine the depth of the virgin soil, which was identified at about 2.30m below the street level.

### *Summary of Results*

- 1) Towards determining if a kiln producing common pottery (sgraffito ware) was located on or near this site: the massive quantity of kiln discards and the presence of refractory bricks with pottery fragments burnt on to them are indisputable proof of the existence of a kiln on or near this site. At this time we believe that the actual kiln structure, if it still exists, is located a few yards further east, in the direction of the old town walls.
- 2) Towards determining what kinds of pottery were being produced here: the massive quantities of pottery found (over 27,000 fragments, one intact bowl, and about 60 plates and bowls which can be partially or wholly reconstructed) give us a very clear picture of the types of pottery which were produced at the kiln in Piazza Cavour. Early maiolica was produced here in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, but in the Renaissance era it is clear that the kiln was producing only slipware (no maiolica). Of the various types of slipware then in use in Italy, at this kiln they were making only sgraffito ware of the *a punta* and *fondo ribassato* type.

- 3) Towards determining when and for how long pottery was being produced here: there are several finds and a few “non finds” which represent important clues related to the time and duration of the activity of the kiln, and all of them point to a period going from the earliest years of the 16<sup>th</sup> century to the end of the century. As mentioned above, the elegant *fondo ribassato* style is known from studies in the area of Pisa to be typical of this period. Most of the motifs like the “crab’s claw” and the “winding ribbon” were incised on to the rim of a plate with a pinwheel or coat of arms in the centre. As the 16<sup>th</sup> century progressed this complicated and time consuming decoration was eliminated and the coats of arms remained with a plain white, undecorated rim. The absence of these “decadent” versions points to a production which was flourishing in the first half of the century. Also the presence of a Medici emblem, the *broncone* or budding branch, usually associated with Giovanni dei Medici (Pope Leo X) on some of the sgraffito *a punta* bowls points to a date in the first quarter of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Some significant “non finds” as mentioned above, are the poppy style sgraffito ware and the marbled ware, the absence of which confirms a date before the early 17<sup>th</sup> century. We expect to obtain further information about the chronology of the kiln from the coins, which have yet to be cleaned and restored.
- 4) Towards determining the function of a kiln in the Renaissance era (16<sup>th</sup> century): clearly, the kiln was firing vessels for many different potters. The abundant presence of kiln spurs with identifying marks on them proves that potters were bringing their own kiln equipment along with their vessels to be fired. In Pisa, long considered the greatest of the Tuscan towns producing sgraffito ware, no such kiln spurs have been found.
- 5) Towards determining who was buying and using this kind of pottery: a great deal of information in this regard can be obtained from the coats of arms and emblems of monasteries incised on the pottery. Special shapes, like the little broad rimmed bowls, and religious emblems, like the Sacred Monogram YHS and attributes of saints, demonstrate that monasteries and convents were important clients of the kiln. Aristocratic families were ordering mostly large plates and serving platters with their coats-of-arms on them. Most of these families were local (Castelfiorentino and Val d’Elsa), but in many cases the arms of Florentine families have been identified.

### **Significance/Benefits of Research**

Our research is significant for scholars of the Renaissance period who wish to know more about how the common man lived and what objects represented part of his everyday life. The kind of pottery we are studying was often ordered by noble families, but it is likely that it was used principally by members of their staff and retinue. Our results are also of interest in relation to the economic history of Tuscany in the late Renaissance period. These results may be considered of academic importance at an international level. However, the immediate benefits of our research are those derived from the presence of our staff and volunteers for a period of one month in an area which at present has a very depressed economy. Castelfiorentino is a town which, unlike Florence, Siena, Lucca, and the other Tuscan “art cities”, has no significant tourist attractions to offer, almost no industry and in recent years has become an economic backwater. The feelings of goodwill that were aroused in the local population by the presence of a large group of volunteers, staying at a local hotel, eating at local restaurants, purchasing in local stores, while helping them to research local history and “create” a meaningful tourist attraction, cannot be over estimated. This enthusiasm on

the part of the local population, which was, at the start, diffident if not downright hostile to the idea of having their town square “torn up by a bunch of foreigners and treasure-hunters” has obviously had significant influence on the policy of the city government as far as the conservation and restoration of the site is concerned. Moreover, the mayor of the city has confirmed that the little local museum, construction of which has been planned for 2007, will include additional rooms to house an exhibit on the history of the kiln.

If a *sustainable environment* is one in which the natural environment, economic development and social life are seen as mutually dependent, then the exploration, study and conservation of this site which had a major role in the economic and social history of a small Italian community corresponds perfectly with the goals of the institute.

### **Dissemination of Results**

- Scientific papers
  - Summary of preliminary results have been sent to the following specialised journals and reviews: *Archeologia Post Medievale*; *Faenza*; *World Archaeology*.
- Presentations (given or planned)
  - Upon completion of the second and final campaign (August 2006) the results of the excavation will be presented at the International Ceramics Symposium in Savona, Italy (formerly known as “Albisola”).
- Articles about the excavation appeared in the following Tuscan newspapers: *La Nazione*, *Il Tirreno*, *Corriere di Firenze*.